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ABSTRACT

This document describes a program to improve the leadership skills of school supervisors. The emphasis is upon effective communication. Training sessions involve small groups. Each participant has the opportunity to play the role of teacher and supervisor in a short teaching session which is videotaped. Immediately following the session, feedback in the form of discussion, consultation, and viewing of the tape helps the participant to single out basic skills in communicating that are in need of improvement. Eight particular skills are identified as being of prime importance for a supervisor to possess in dealing with teachers. (1) attending behavior -- demonstrating interest and listening attentatively; (2) leading -- inviting verbal expression and opening lines of communication; (3) focussing -- isolating the important points under discussion and keeping them upper-most in the conversation; (4) questioning -- asking questions that will elicit the most response and encourage further understanding; (5) clarifying -- understanding the perceptions of a situation and another's point of view; (6) reflecting feeling -- sympathetic understanding of problems; (7) respecting -- displaying a positive regard for the other person; and (8) summarizing -- clearly reviewing the conversation illustrating a complete understanding of the situation under discussion. (JD)

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IMPROVING SUPERVISORS' INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

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IMPROVING SUPERVISORS' INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Recent research has amply illustrated the importance of effective interpersonal communication for the supervisor. Supervisors are often called upon to solve complex problems basically through the process of interpersonal communication. In fact, research indicates that the supervisor spends over 70% of his or her time either talking or listening. This can mean that poor interpersonal communication on the part of the supervisor can seriously impair his or her effectiveness.

In the past it was thought that while supervisors could be trained to be better observers and data collectors, it was not possible to have significant effect on interpersonal communication. The main reason for this line of thought was that since communication cannot be done alone, it was very difficult to develop effective training programs. However, recent research results based on modern techniques in the area of counselling and education have indicated that it is possible to effectively improve interpersonal communication. If communication is defined as knowing how to put thoughts and words together so that they are meaningful to someone else, then it becomes a conscious process that can be improved. The problem now becomes one of defining the component parts of the process so that they can be interjected into a learning program.

At the School of Education, University of Massachusetts, the Effective Personal Communication Program has been developing and testing a training program for improving communication. The program draws from the fields of education, psychology, counseling, and communication studies and has been tested with school supervisors, sales management personnel, and business executives.

Essentially the program is based on a step-by-step approach to improving verbal and non-verbal communication. The communication process is broken down into a series of skills which are dealt with one at a time and with each skill building on the other. The structured training aspect of the program insures that there is an opportunity for practice with immediate feedback in a "fail-safe" situation.

In outline form, the training is structured so that there is time to study and discuss each individual skill and then actually practice each skill. The practice phase is the critical component. Here, participants are divided into small groups of 5 or 6. Each person is asked to develop a short (5 to 8 minute) teaching lesson. Each person in the group has the opportunity to play the role of the teacher and supervisor for each skill under consideration. For example, while one person teaches a lesson, another takes the role of the supervisor and the rest become the class. Immediately after the teaching session, the supervisor goes through a supervisory session with the teacher and attempts to emphasize the particular supervisory skill under consideration. Each supervisory session is videotaped so that the tape can be analyzed by the group in order to note the strengths and weaknesses.

The critical phase of the practice sessions is the immediate feedback. This phase has three aspects which are: (1) subject feedback, (2) videotape feedback, and (3) consultant feedback. Subject feedback refers to the teacher who is going through the supervision session. This person is given the opportunity to express his or her feelings about the strengths and weaknesses of the session. The second concept, videotape feedback, gives the supervisor the opportunity to actually see the session that was just completed. This self-confrontation allows the supervisor to see himself as he actually was and compare other types of feedback to the actual session. The third aspect,

consultant feedback, becomes the catalyst between the subject and videotape feedback. Once a person has identified an area to work on, he then needs suggestions on what to do next. The consultant's role is to suggest strategies and alternatives that might be tried in future sessions. The well informed and sensitive consultant is often the difference between a fair session and an excellent one.

The helping skills that are used for the basis of this training are not new, they are simply ways of facilitating positive human relations. However, a supervisor should make a deliberate effort to increase his awareness of them and build them into his repertoire of supervisory skills. This repertoire of skills would then allow the person to be more flexible and versatile since he now has more options available. For the supervisor it has been found that a series of techniques called "Helping Skills" are extremely important. These helping skills respond to the most common complaints leveled at supervisors, some of which are:

1. "He says something and denies it at the next meeting."
2. "He passes the buck in problems."
3. "We'll have to think about it, he'll say."
4. "He doesn't give me a chance to talk. I go in with a problem and never do get a chance to tell about it."
5. "Whenever I make a suggestion, he throws cold water on it. I've quit making suggestions."
6. "He interrupts me when I talk."
7. "He argues with everything I have to say even before I state my case."
8. "He rephrases what I say in such a way that he puts words into my mouth that I didn't mean."

Among other things, such habits in a supervisor betray a lack of respect for the person and a deficiency in listening skills. It is not hard

to understand why people might resist help from such persons. But even well-intentioned supervisors can unwittingly fall into some of these same traps, not realizing the negative effects of their behaviors. It is a good idea, therefore, for supervisors to review some basic helping skills which may make teachers more responsive to their supervisory efforts. Below is a brief outline of the basic helping skills covered in the supervisory training sessions.

1. Attending behavior.

   This is simply the skill of demonstrating that you are interested and listening to what he has to say. Eye contact is maintained and you avoid changing the topic if the person has still more to say about it.

2. Leading.

   Particularly useful in the opening stages of a conference, this skill invites verbal expression and opens the lines of communication. Through the use of question leads, you can help the person probe, analyze, elaborate and generally be active rather than passive. The leads generally anticipate the direction you want to go, e.g., "Tell me more about what happened" (direct leading). Or, the lead may be to get the person to determine his own direction, e.g., "What do you think about your situation?" (indirect leading).

3. Focussing.

   This skill may be employed to pin down a topic that the supervisor thinks would be productive to explore. If a larger problem is being discussed, it can help isolate a component part that needs to be dealt with. When a discussion seems to be rambling, or ranging superficially over too many topics, this skill can be most useful. In supervision, where a main focus is so important, you will find this a frequently-used skill.

Examples: "Yes, that seems to be part of the problem. Suppose we take a closer look at it."

"Which of those 3 things do you think it's most important to us to talk about first?"

4. Questioning.

Open-ended questions are the types that will elicit the most response and encourage the teacher to further explore and understand an issue. Conversely, a closed-ended question can usually be answered with a brief yes or no and is more often for the purpose of supplying information to the supervisor.

Examples: "Do you get along well with your students?" (closed)

"Could you tell me a little about how you feel you're getting along with your students?" (open)

5. Clarifying.

This skill shows that you are trying to understand the person's perceptions of a situation, that you are trying to see it as he is seeing it. You may make a statement such as: "I'm not quite sure what you mean. Let me state what I think you're saying and tell me if this is right." Or, you may phrase it as a question: "Would you explain that to me again?" Rightly used, this skill is telling the person you sincerely want to understand his point of view. Wrongly used, this skill can imply criticism or imposition of your own interpretations, e.g., "I'm confused. Are you saying that you take no responsibility for what happened?"

6. Reflecting feeling.

Feelings can get in the way of a successful conference if they are not expressed and acknowledged, particularly if they are anxiety- or anger-producing feelings. This skill demonstrates that the supervisor is aware of and responding to the feelings he or she is experiencing.

Example: "You really feel relieved now that the observation is over."

Sharing feelings is an extension of this skill: "I often felt anxious about being observed too." Be careful, however, not to shift the focus to yourself for more than a moment or two.

4. Respecting.

With this skill the supervisor is displaying a positive regard for the person as an individual and as a human being. You respect the teacher's feelings, experiences, and capabilities.

Examples: "You've worked successfully with kids outside of school. Let's see if we can capitalize on that and transfer some techniques to the school. It's bound to help matters."

"Maybe you can give me some suggestions as to how I might best help you?"

5. Summarizing.

This is a natural note on which to end a conference. The ideas are reviewed and tied together so that both the supervisor and the teacher leave with a common understanding of what occurred and a clear indication of a direction to take. Agreements and plans are re-stated. What makes this a basic helping skill is that it gives the teacher reassurance that the supervisor has been listening and that there is definite movement toward change, progress and accomplishment.

Examples: "Before we go, would you just briefly review those two main concerns and what you've planned to do about them?"

As was mentioned earlier, the program has been tested on a variety of groups. The results have been very positive, especially in the areas of increasing participants' confidence in their communication ability and helping them become aware of the variety of communication strategies they can employ (written material on the testing can be obtained from the author

by request).

The most important aspect of this project is the demonstration that interpersonal communication can be consciously improved. The breaking down of the communication process into defined skills and the use of immediate videotape feedback on practice sessions appear to be two major components in the training process. When these components are combined with a step-by-step approach with each skill building on the other, the supervisor ends up with an overall picture of the interpersonal communication process. Thus, the supervisor acquires a repertoire of communication skills that can be used in the actual work situation. This repertoire then allows the supervisor to become more flexible, versatile, and effective, since he or she now has more effective helping skills at his or her command.